

A
SHIP
in the
DARK
YARROW
TOWNSEND



2 PALMER STREET, FROME,
SOMERSET BA11 1DS

Text © Yarrow Townsend 2024
Illustration © Marie-Alice Harel 2024

First published in Great Britain in 2024
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Cover illustration by Marie-Alice Harel
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



1 3 5 7 9 1 0 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-913696-49-8
eISBN 978-1-915947-52-9

For Liz, Anneka & the birds

I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.

Emily Dickinson



Prologue

The ship tore through the ocean, its pointed hull cutting through the waves like a blade. A weathered old sea captain watched from the foredeck in the stark moonlight. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to shake the feeling that something was wrong. Yes, the ship stank to high heaven of blubber and burnt iron. Yes, a trail of dark birds followed the scraps of guts and skin they'd thrown overboard. Yes, his crew were exhausted and close to giving up. But that was all part of being at sea.

This was something different. Ever since they'd processed the catch and packed it away in those barrels, something had changed. The men were uneasy, watching over their shoulders, casting glances overboard –

indeed, the captain found himself watching too, because the feeling was so strong.

The feeling that they were being followed.

‘Press on,’ said the captain. ‘Pay it no heed.’

He tried not to see the dark shapes moving through the water from the corner of his eye.

‘Where is O’Sullivan?’ he demanded, looking around for his chief navigator – the man who would lead them back to port, back home to sell their cargo for a small fortune.

‘He’s gone, Captain,’ said the first mate.

‘Gone?’

‘Said the ship’s cursed. Took the little whaleboat and left.’

‘Cursed? Nonsense.’

He reached for the charts and unrolled them in the lamplight. They were dangerously close to the shallows here, he knew that much. They needed to—

The captain froze. A look of sudden horror had overtaken the first mate.

‘*He maketh the deep to boil like a pot,*’ he whispered, gazing out at the water.

It was as though the very ocean had come to life. The sea churned: a storm of swirling foam that blistered and bubbled, seething hungrily about the ship. Dark birds rained down upon the surface, sending a spray of silver fish leaping desperately from the simmering tide. Dread

filled the captain as the angry water gave way to another shape: a dark arc moving purposefully towards them, leaving a trail of shimmering water in its wake.

‘Glory be,’ said the captain, as a dozen more dark shapes rose from the sea.

He tried to cry out, to shake himself to his senses – to call for *All hands to the engine!* and *Full steam ahead!*

But it was too late. United in common purpose, the creatures launched themselves at the hull of the ship.

There was a thunderous crash. The captain’s hat spun from his head and flew into the waves. The ship lurched, swaying sickeningly back and forth. The captain felt terror rise through him. This was the end.

He raised his hands as though to pray – but before he could muster a word to beg forgiveness, there was an almighty crack, and the vessel split in two, wedged on an underwater bank. Water seethed into the torn timbers and broken beams. Like a lapping tongue, the sea drew the barrels from the ship, reclaiming them, sending them spiralling through the deep water and drifting out with the currents. The dark shapes gave a triumphant cry – a lowing, echoing sound. The cargo belonged to the sea. Everything belonged to the sea.